

Social Psychological Bulletin

Psychologia Społeczna

Women Can't Have It All: Benevolent Sexism Predicts Attitudes Toward Working (vs. Stay-at-Home) Mothers

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Social Psychological Bulletin, 2019, Vol. 14(1), Article e29461, <https://doi.org/10.32872/spb.v14i1.29461>

Received: 2018-09-11 • Accepted: 2019-03-15 • Published (VoR): 2019-05-15



Handling Editor: Pascal Gygax, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper was to test differences in perceptions towards a woman who took a 3-month maternity leave (a working mother) as opposed to a 3-year maternity leave (a stay-at-home mother), and then to apply the ambivalent sexism theory to predict those differences. We expected that in Poland, where motherhood is highly appreciated, it is especially benevolent (not hostile) sexism that predicts less positive attitudes toward working mothers, compared to stay-at-home mothers. In two studies, we found that the working mother was perceived as less warm, less effective as a parent and less interpersonally appealing and more successful at work. Additionally, although the stay-at-home mother was evaluated as less successful at work, she was not perceived as less competent. We discuss this as a reflection of the “Mother-Pole” phenomenon, where mothers in Poland are perceived as not only kind, but also competent. Afterward, we showed that benevolent (but not hostile) sexism predicts differences in perceiving the stay-at-home mother and working mother. Participants higher in benevolent sexism rated the stay-at-home mother as warmer, more parenting-effective and more interpersonally appealing compared to the working mother, while participants lower in benevolent sexism perceived them equally well. Studies suggest that benevolent sexism predicts a more positive perception of traditional mothers (as opposed to nontraditional mothers), and at the same time, maintains the status quo of traditional gender relations.

Keywords

benevolent sexism, motherhood, nontraditional women, working mothers



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Studies consistently reveal that the traditional worldview about women's motherhood-related obligations is still valid (e.g., CBOS, 2013). There is a preference for the traditional division of labor, where men are breadwinners and women are homemakers. Although acceptance of working mothers is growing, the majority agrees that when a child is aged below three, the woman should be a stay-at-home mother (Antosz, 2012). Thus, working mothers still violate traditional gender norms (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005).

Because of motherhood-related responsibilities, women drop out of the job market, earn less (Sigle-Rushton & Waldfogel, 2007) and are less likely to be hired or promoted (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004). The motherhood penalty (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007) affects women's careers and reinforces gender inequality in the labor market – especially in Poland, where the index of employment among mothers is one of the lowest in Europe (Kurowska, 2010). Additionally, women who combine career with motherhood are perceived as interpersonally inadequate (e.g., Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005).

The aim of this paper was to test differences in the perception of career woman who took a 3-month maternity leave (working mother) as opposed to a 3-year maternity leave (stay-at-home mother), and then to apply the ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) to predict those differences. The effect of benevolent and hostile sexism on attitudes toward traditional/nontraditional mothers has been tested before (e.g., Gaunt, 2013). Results suggest that individuals higher in benevolent and hostile sexism accept women who comply with traditional gender roles more. The replication of these results in the Polish context, where mothers are highly appreciated and idealized (Hryciuk & Korolczuk, 2012) merits investigation. As negative attitudes toward women who want to combine a successful career with motherhood do foster gender inequality, studies that define predictors of those attitudes also seem important. In fact, we expected that mothers in Poland might not evoke hostility, and, because of that, benevolent sexism would especially moderate attitudes toward stay-at-home/working mothers.

Perception of Stay-at-Home vs. Working Mothers

According to the stereotype content model (e.g., Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008), each group can be characterized by two dimensions: warmth and competence. Women are perceived as warmer, and less competent than men. However, this is mostly true for women who meet expectations arising from traditional norms (e.g., homemakers; Eagly & Mladinic, 1994). Women who violate the prescriptive aspect of gender stereotypes evoke negative reactions and experience a backlash (e.g., Rudman, 1998). Compared to traditional women, nontraditional women (e.g., feminists) are more respected for their competence. However, at the same time, they are perceived as colder and interpersonally inadequate. A unique case of a woman who occupies a nontraditional gender role is a working mother. Indeed, previous research has shown that although working mothers (compared to stay-at-home mothers) are perceived as more competent and job-successful, they are also evaluated as colder, less devoted to motherhood, and less likeable (Brescoll & Uhlmann,

2005; Bridges, Etaugh, & Barnes-Farrell, 2002; Coleman & Franiuk, 2011; Cuddy et al., 2004; Okimoto & Heilman, 2012). In line with previous studies, we expected that while a working mother would be appreciated for her professional skills, she would be perceived as colder and less parenting-effective than a stay-at-home mother. Also, as nontraditional women evoke a backlash that could manifest in social isolation (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004), we expected a working mother to be evaluated as less interpersonally appealing. However, contrary to the stereotype content model, but considering the Polish context, we did not expect she would be perceived as more competent.

One of the essential elements of Poland's national identity and culture is the "Mother-Pole" phenomenon, in which mothers are warm and kind, and, at the same time, competent, multitasking, and strong (Hryciuk & Korolczuk, 2012). This phenomenon is rooted in the 19th century, the time of the Partitions. While men "fought on the battlefield", women, left alone, had to raise children with a strong national identity (Frąckowiak-Sochańska, 2011) and fulfill stereotypically male obligations. In 20th century Communist Poland, women were also expected to efficiently combine domestic and professional duties (Fidelis, 2004; Gal & Kligman, 2000; Krause, 2016; Malinowska, 1995; Titkow, 2001). In line with the social role theory (Eagly, 1987), it might have shaped the perception of mothers as warm and competent. Moreover, women in Poland are perceived as having an inner strength (resourcefulness) that helps them to cope with the adversities of life (Mikołajczak, 2016). We expected the stay-at-home (vs. working) mother to be perceived as equally competent.

Sexism and Attitudes Toward Working Mothers

According to the ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996), sexism is a multidimensional construct that encompasses hostile and benevolent attitudes toward women. While hostile sexism is evident antipathy toward women (Allport, 1954), benevolent sexism is seemingly positive and flattering (e.g., Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Bohnet, Ahlborn, & Steiner, 2010), yet actually a patronizing belief, according to which women are pure, moral but incompetent. Although these concepts differ in tone, they work together like the proverbial carrot and stick (Jackman, 1994) to justify the traditional system of gender relations, where women are caregivers and men are breadwinners (Eagly, 1987; Glick et al., 2000, 2004; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Several studies have shown that benevolent sexism is related to positive evaluations of women who comply with traditional gender norms, and hostile sexism predicts negative evaluations of women who violate them (e.g., Becker, 2010; Gaunt, 2013; Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, & Zhu, 1997; Hebl, King, Glick, Singletary, & Kazama, 2007; Kofta, Soral, Kwiatkowska, Kapusta, & Mikołajczak, 2016). For example, Glick et al. (1997) found that hostile sexism predicted negative attitudes toward career women and benevolent sexism predicted positive attitudes toward homemakers. However, benevolent sexism is also related to negative attitudes toward female

norm violators, whose behavior is perceived as inappropriate (e.g., Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Viki & Abrams, 2002).

In line with previous studies, we could expect that both benevolent and hostile sexism would predict less positive attitudes toward working mothers. However, Poland has a firm Catholic identity. In terms of gender roles, this implies a strong identification of women as mothers and caregivers (Janion, 1996, 2006; Łaciak, 2012). As mothers in Poland are perceived highly favorably, it is possible they will not raise hostility. Also, due to its assumptions that women are predisposed to be mothers, we expected benevolent sexism to be a more robust predictor of attitudes toward mothers, even those who combine motherhood with professional development.

Research Overview

To test our hypothesis, we conducted two studies. In the pilot study we tested whether the duration of the maternity leave taken predicts the way a mother is perceived. Participants were given a scenario (prepared specifically for this study) about a successful woman who had recently become a mother. We manipulated the length of the maternity leave: three years in a stay-at-home mother condition versus three months in a working mother condition.¹ After reading the scenario, participants evaluated the warmth, competence, parenting and job effectiveness of the female character. We expected the stay-at-home mother to be perceived as warmer, equally competent (“Mother-Pole” phenomenon), more parenting-effective and less successful at work compared to the working mother. Additionally, as violating traditional norms may have an implication for liking and social ostracism (desire to interact), we measured the general impression the female character evoked (pilot study) and her interpersonal appeal (main study).

In the main study, we added benevolent and hostile sexism into the model to investigate whether beliefs moderate the effect of the mother’s role. We expected that benevolent sexism would especially moderate attitudes toward stay-at-home/working mothers. We hypothesized that participants higher in benevolent sexism would evaluate the stay-at-home mother as warmer, more parenting effective and more interpersonally appealing than the working mother, while participants lower in benevolent sexism would evaluate them equally well. As benevolent sexism is associated with the stereotype that women are incompetent (Glick & Fiske, 1996), we expected participants higher in sexism to perceive the stay-at-home mother as less competent and successful than the working mother, while participants lower in sexism would evaluate them similarly.

1) Mothers in Poland are entitled to 1 year of paid and 3 years of unpaid maternity leave.

Pilot Study

Method

Participants

A group of 90 students (51 women, $M_{age} = 21.71$, $SD = 2.21$) attending Language Studies voluntarily participated in the study during classes.

Materials and Procedure

Perception of the stay-at-home/working mother — Participants read a short scenario that described a new mother. Depending on the experimental condition, she took a 3-year (stay-at-home mother) or 3-month maternity leave (working mother). The full scenario was as follows: “Agnes is 34. She and her husband have recently become parents. Before that, she was employed as a project manager in a trade organization. She would leave for work at 8 a.m. and come back home at 6 p.m. Sometimes, she had to work overtime or go for business trips that were a few days long. After the baby was born, she took 3-year/3-month break from work”. After reading the scenario, the participants evaluated Agnes using the following measures. If not mentioned otherwise, dependent variables were measured on a 1 (definitely not) to 7 (definitely yes) scale.

Warmth and competence — Participants indicated to what extent the female character was warm, friendly, helpful, moral, honest, good (warmth, $\alpha = .94$) and competent, intelligent and talented (competence, $\alpha = .91$; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007).

Parenting effectiveness — We measured the perceived parenting effectiveness of the character with three statements: “She is a good parent”; “She will have a good relationship with her child”; “She and her child will have a strong bond” ($\alpha = .95$; Coleman & Franiuk, 2011).

Job effectiveness — The perceived job effectiveness of the character was measured with three statements: “She is a good employee”, “She will succeed in her career”, “She will be appreciated by her superiors and colleagues” ($\alpha = .88$; Coleman & Franiuk, 2011).

General impression — To capture the general impression of the character, participants were asked to indicate their general impression of Agnes using a 1 (definitely unfavorable) to 7 (definitely favorable) scale.

Results

To capture the effect of role (stay-at-home/working mother) on the perception of the scenario’s female character, we conducted a multivariate analysis of variation (MANOVA)². Compared to the working mother, the stay-at-home mother was perceived as warmer,

$F(1, 88) = 25.67, p < .001, \eta^2 = .226$, and equally competent, $F(1, 88) = 0.01, p = .914, \eta^2 = .000$. She was also perceived as more parenting-effective, $F(1, 88) = 126.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .589$, and less job-effective, $F(1, 88) = 52.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .374$. Finally, participants had a more favorable impression of her, $F(1, 88) = 27.72, p < .001, \eta^2 = .240$. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Correlations Between Variables and Descriptive Statistics (Pilot Study)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	Stay-at-home mother		Working mother	
						M	95% CI	M	95% CI
1. Warmth	-	.61***	.65***	.23	.66***	5.48	[5.18, 5.79]	4.28	[3.91, 4.64]
2. Competence	.65***	-	.37*	.35*	.40*	5.59	[5.31, 5.87]	6.62	[5.25, 5.98]
3. Parenting effectiveness	.70***	.56***	-	-.11	.69***	6.26	[5.99, 6.52]	3.48	[3.06, 3.89]
4. Job effectiveness	.21	.38*	.26	-	.08	4.39	[4.01, 4.76]	6.03	[5.76, 6.30]
5. General impression	.57***	.45**	.66***	.43**	-	5.80	[5.40, 6.19]	4.35	[3.96, 4.74]

Note. Correlations for the stay-at-home mother ($n = 44$) are presented below the diagonal, and correlations for the working mother ($n = 46$) are presented above the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

As expected the stay-at-home mother (as opposed to the working mother) was perceived as warmer and more parenting-effective. Additionally, in line with the “Mother-Pole” phenomenon, but contrary to the stereotype content model, the stay-at-home mother was not evaluated as less competent. The fact that the traditional woman was marked high on both warmth and competence is consistent with results of other research conducted in Poland (e.g., Mikołajczak, Pietrzak, & Winiewski, 2009; Pietrzak, Mikołajczak, Chroł, & Markiewicz, 2011). Still, the stay-at-home mother was perceived as less job-effective than the working mother.

In the main study, we aimed to test whether benevolent and hostile sexism moderate attitudes toward stay-at-home/working mothers. Given the Polish context, we expected that benevolent sexism would be a more robust predictor of attitudes toward mothers. We predicted that participants high (vs. low) in benevolent sexism would accept the stay-at-home (vs. working) mother more. Instead of students, we recruited a more diverse sample through an online research panel, but we did not expect that this would affect the results. We also replaced the one-item measurement of overall impression with four items measuring interpersonal appeal.

2) We controlled all statistical models described in this paper for participants’ gender. As it was not a significant factor, we will not describe the effect of gender in more detail.

Main Study

Method

Participants

A group of 101 participants (56 women, $M_{age} = 32.88$, $SD = 12.07$) was recruited via the researchonline.pl research portal. Each participant was paid 3 PLN (about 1\$) for participating.

Materials and Procedure

Sexism — We measured benevolent (e.g., “Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess”; $\alpha = .88$, $M = 3.74$; 95% CI [3.53, 3.94]) and hostile sexism (e.g., “Women are too easily offended”; $\alpha = .86$, $M = 3.95$; 95% CI [3.77, 4.13]) with the Ambivalent Sexism Scale (ASI, Glick & Fiske, 1996; Polish adaptation by Mikołajczak & Pietrzak, 2014). Participants indicated their agreement with statements on a 0 (I strongly disagree) to 5 (I strongly agree) scale. Scales were positively correlated, $r(101) = .46$, $p < .001$.

Perception of the stay-at-home/working mother — To measure attitudes towards the stay-at-home/working mother, we used the same scenarios as in the pilot study. Participants first read the scenario and then evaluated the female character using the measures below. Dependent variables were measured on 1 (definitely not) to 7 (definitely yes) scales.

Warmth, competence, parenting effectiveness and job effectiveness — To measure the perceived warmth ($\alpha = .95$), competence ($\alpha = .88$), parenting effectiveness ($\alpha = .98$) and job effectiveness ($\alpha = .92$) of the female character, we used the same scales as in the pilot study.

Interpersonal appeal — To show their desire to interact with the female character, participants indicated their agreement with four statements: “Would you like her to be your neighbor?”, “Would you like her to be your friend?”, “Would you like your children to be friends with hers?”, “Would you like to work with her?” ($\alpha = .92$; Okimoto & Heilman, 2012).

Results

We conducted a MANOVA to capture the effect of role (stay-at-home/working mother) on the perception of the female character. Afterwards, we included benevolent and hostile sexism in the model and conducted a series of multiple moderation analyses with PROCESS (Model 2; Hayes, 2013). For every dependent variable, we tested the model in which the woman’s role served as an independent variable, while benevolent and hostile sexism were the moderators. However, as the two-way interaction of role and hostile sex-

ism was never significant (all $ps > .285$), we eventually tested the simple moderation model, with benevolent sexism as a single moderator and hostile sexism as a control variable (Model 1)³. We coded the stay-at-home mother as 0 and the working mother as 1. The main effect of benevolent sexism on the dependent variables was never significant (all $ps > .224$). For the faculty of presentation, we will describe the results separately for every dependent variable. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Correlations Between Variables and Descriptive Statistics (Main Study)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Stay-at-home mother		Working mother	
								<i>M</i>	95% CI	<i>M</i>	95% CI
1. Warmth	-	.33*	.76***	.25	.68***	-.25	.05	5.34	[5.02, 5.67]	4.30	[3.98, 4.62]
2. Competence	.70***	-	.10	.57***	.23	-.02	-.05	5.55	[5.25, 5.85]	5.27	[4.98, 5.55]
3. Parenting effectiveness	.78***	.57***	-	.06	.67***	-.10	.17	5.91	[5.60, 6.22]	3.79	[3.37, 4.21]
4. Job effectiveness	.29	.37**	.33*	-	.20	.08	.17	4.96	[4.56, 5.37]	5.66	[5.39, 5.93]
5. Interpersonal appeal	.71***	.62***	.69*	.55***	-	-.13	.23	5.63	[5.26, 5.99]	4.43	[4.09, 4.77]
6. Benevolent sexism	.33*	.15	.41**	.13	.37*	-	.47***				
7. Hostile sexism	.33*	.11	.21	.20	.31*	.44**	-				

Note. Correlations for the stay-at-home mother ($n = 46$) are presented below the diagonal, and correlations for the working mother ($n = 50$) are presented above the diagonal.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Warmth

The stay-at-home mother was perceived as warmer than the working mother, $F(1, 94) = 21.47, p < .001, \eta^2 = .186$. A two-way interaction of woman’s role and benevolent sexism (BS) was significant, $b = -0.63, SE = 0.13, p = .003; 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.04, -0.22], R^2 \text{ change} = .073$. Closer inspections of simple slopes showed participants low in BS (-1 SD) perceived the stay-at-home and working mom as equally warm, $b = -0.34, SE = 0.31, \beta = -.14, p = .275, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.96, 0.28]; M_{\text{stay-at-home}} = 5.01, M_{\text{working}} = 4.67$, while participants high in BS ($+1 \text{ SD}$) evaluated the stay-at-home mother as warmer, $b = -1.69, SE = 0.31, \beta = -.70, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-2.30, -1.08]; M_{\text{stay-at-home}} = 5.57, M_{\text{working}} = 3.88$. This is presented in Figure 1.

3) Regardless of whether or not we added the second dimension of sexism to the model as a covariate variable, we obtained similar results.

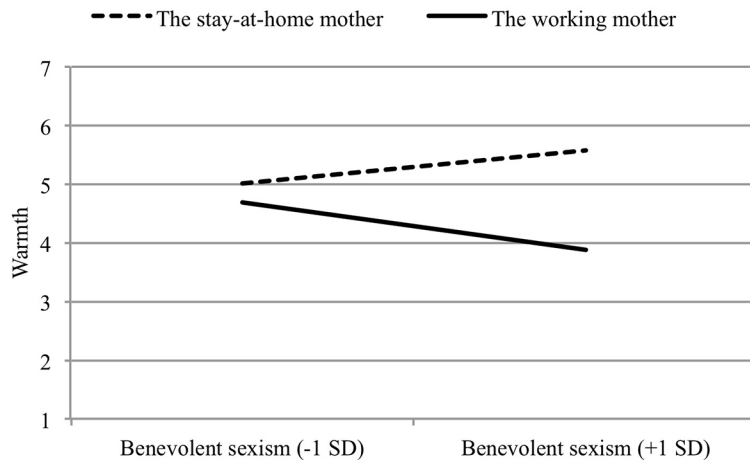


Figure 1. The two-way interaction of role (stay-at-home mother vs. working mother) and benevolent sexism on perceived warmth of the female character (main study).

Competence

Neither the main effect of role, $F(1, 94) = 1.93$, $p = .168$, $\eta^2 = .02$, on assigned competence, nor the interaction with benevolent sexism was significant ($p = .415$).

Parenting Effectiveness

The stay-at-home mother was perceived as a better parent, $F(1, 94) = 64.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .407$. The interaction of role and benevolent sexism was significant, $b = -0.60$, $SE = 0.24$, $p = .017$, 95% CI [-1.08, -0.11], $R^2 \text{ change} = .035$. A simple slope analysis revealed that while participants low in BS, -1 SD; $b = -1.43$, $SE = 0.37$, $\beta = -.43$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-2.16, -0.69]; $M_{\text{stay-at-home}} = 5.49$, $M_{\text{working}} = 4.07$, and high in BS, +1 SD; $b = -2.70$, $SE = 0.36$, $\beta = -.81$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-3.42, -1.98]; $M_{\text{stay-at-home}} = 6.20$, $M_{\text{working}} = 3.50$, both perceived the stay-at-home mother as more parenting-effective, this effect was stronger among those high in BS.

Job-Effectiveness

The stay-at-home mother was evaluated as a worse employee, $F(1, 94) = 8.55$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .083$. The two-way interaction of role and benevolent sexism was not significant ($p = .559$).

Interpersonal Appeal

The stay-at-home mother was perceived as more interpersonally appealing, $F(1, 94) = 23.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .199$. The main effect of role was qualified by a significant interaction with benevolent sexism, $b = -0.63$, $SE = 0.22$, $p = .006$; 95% CI [-1.07, -0.19], $R^2 \text{ change} = .06$.

While participants low in BS ($-1\ SD$) perceived the women in both conditions similarly, $b = -0.46$, $SE = 0.34$, $\beta = -.17$, $p = .179$, 95% CI $[-1.13, 0.21]$; $M_{\text{stay-at-home}} = 5.21$, $M_{\text{working}} = 4.75$, participants high in BS ($+1\ SD$) perceived the working mother as less appealing, $b = -1.81$, $SE = 0.33$, $\beta = -.67$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-2.46, -1.15]$; $M_{\text{stay-at-home}} = 5.90$, $M_{\text{working}} = 4.10$.

Discussion

As expected, benevolent sexism moderated attitudes toward the stay-at-home/working mother. Participants higher in benevolent sexism perceived the working mother as less warm and interpersonally appealing, while participants lower in benevolent sexism evaluated them equally well. Although both groups of participants evaluated the working mothers as less parenting-effective, the effect was stronger among participants high in benevolent sexism. Results suggest that benevolent sexism predicts a more favorable perception of the stay-at-home mother. However, the effect of benevolent sexism was significant only on warmth-related dimensions; assigned competence and job effectiveness was not predicted. Hostile sexism did not moderate the effect of role. We will discuss these results in the general discussion.

General Discussion

The main goal of this paper was to test whether benevolent and hostile sexism predicts differences in perceiving stay-at-home/working mothers. As sexism justifies traditional gender relations, we hypothesized that participants higher in benevolent sexism would perceive the working mother less favorably than the stay-at-home mother, as the former violates traditional gender norms. At the same time, we expected participants low in benevolent sexism to evaluate the working and stay-at-home mothers equally well. Given that mothers are greatly appreciated in Poland, we did not expect hostile sexism to moderate attitudes.

In two studies, we consistently showed that the working mother was perceived less positively than the stay-at-home mother and experienced a backlash. She was evaluated as less warm, less parenting-effective and less interpersonally appealing. Any attempt to combine motherhood with a professional career leads to disapproval and social isolation.

As expected, the stay-at-home mother was not perceived as less competent. Although one possible explanation is that the contents of the scenario emphasized the competence of the female character, we interpreted this as a reflection of the “Mother Pole” phenomenon, in which mothers in Poland are perceived as both kind and skillful. This result suggests that the prediction of the stereotype content model cannot be applied universally, and that prevailing representations may affect how certain subtypes of women are perceived. Although the stay-at-home mother was not evaluated as less intelligent or talented, the comparison revealed significant differences in perceived job effectiveness. The

mother who took a three-year maternity leave was evaluated as a less effective employee. This is in line with previous studies that have shown that mothers in the job market hit the maternal wall and are discriminated against (e.g., [Anderson, Binder, & Krause, 2003](#); [Crosby, Williams, & Biernat, 2004](#)). Gender inequality in the division of household duties ([Bobrowicz, 2007](#); [CBOS, 2018](#); [Fuwa & Cohen, 2007](#)) or short supply of daycare ([GUS, 2016](#)) often makes a longer maternity leave inevitable. The negative perception of professional skills of mothers who spend more time on leave seems to have a substantial impact on the persistence of gender inequality in the labor market.

As expected, we have found that benevolent sexism predicts differences in perceiving stay-at-home/working mothers. Participants low in benevolent sexism evaluated both as equally warm and interpersonally appealing, while those high in benevolent sexism ranked the stay-at-home mother higher. Benevolent sexism predicted stereotype-driven evaluations and fostered a backlash against the working mother. Although the interaction of role and benevolent sexism with respect to parenting effectiveness was significant, both participants low and high in benevolent sexism evaluated the working mother as less parenting-effective (still, the effect was stronger among those high in benevolent sexism). It is likely that even those who do not endorse benevolent sexism hold a belief that women cannot work and be a good mother at the same time. Nevertheless, we managed to replicate the results known from previous research (e.g., [Abrams et al., 2003](#)): that benevolent sexism is related to less positive attitudes toward women who violate traditional gender norms.

Contrary to previous research (e.g., [Hebl et al., 2007](#)), hostile sexism did not predict the perception of the stay-at-home/working mother. Though this may seem surprising (as, theoretically, hostile sexism is related to negative evaluations of traditional norm violators; [Glick & Fiske, 1996](#)), there are several possible explanations. Firstly, it is benevolent (not hostile) sexism that involves the assumption that due to their moral superiority women are prepared to be mothers and this is the role they should play in society. Secondly, the nontraditional woman from the scenario might not have been nontraditional enough to raise hostility – after all, she was a mother ([Szastok, Kossowska, & de Lemus, 2019](#)). It may be due to the Polish idealization of mothers that hostile beliefs did not moderate those attitudes. Finally, some studies have already shown that benevolent sexism is a more powerful predictor of attitudes that justify traditional gender norms (e.g., [Abrams et al., 2003](#); [Becker & Wright, 2011](#); [Jost & Kay, 2005](#)). Further research is needed to distinguish the specific effect of benevolent and hostile sexism.

As sexism is related to the assumption that women are incompetent, we expected participants higher in sexism to evaluate the stay-at-home mother as less competent and successful at work. However, neither hostile nor benevolent sexism interacted with the woman's role on competence and job effectiveness. Since perceived competence is a less critical dimension in female stereotypes (e.g., [Prentice & Carranza, 2002](#)), it may be that it is less sensitive to the effect of prejudice, as it matters less for the overall impression.

In these studies, participants read a scenario describing a career woman who became a mother. The contents in the stay-at-home mother scenario do not match the usual definition of a stay-at-home mother, who, above all, is a caregiver (e.g., Gaunt, 2013). However, from the perspective of gender equality, mothers have to participate in the job market. The stay-at-home mother scenario (only) involved a 3-year maternity leave, as that seems useful to measure attitudes toward women who combine motherhood with a career (giving them different time priorities). This way, we referred more to the real-life experiences of women. Additionally, as the experimental conditions differed only in the duration of the leave, the interpretation of the result was more straightforward.

The studies found that, in Poland, it is benevolent sexism that moderates attitudes toward the stay-at-home/working mother. However, these results must be interpreted with caution. Future research may define the role of benevolent and hostile sexism in shaping attitudes toward mothers in different cultural contexts while, at the same, time providing cumulative evidence for these effects (see Cumming & Calin-Jageman, 2017, for a discussion on the need for cumulative evidence).

The results confirm that women are between a rock and a hard place. If they show a strong commitment to their professional career, they will inevitably be perceived as interpersonally inadequate. In turn, if they devote more time to childcare, it will cost them professional credibility. Our findings suggest that women cannot have it all: a professional career does not go hand in hand with motherhood. This is especially true among those high in benevolent sexism, as they present more positive attitudes toward mothers who take longer maternity leaves. By contrast, the results suggest that participants lower in benevolent sexism did not blame mothers (or blamed them less) for combining a career with motherhood. To conclude, we showed that benevolent sexism predicts a more positive perception of women in the traditional role and, therefore, maintains the traditional gender relations.

Funding: This research was supported by a grant from the National Science Centre (2011/03/N/HS6/02312).

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgments: The authors have no support to report.

Data Availability: For both studies a dataset is freely available (see the [Supplementary Materials](#) section).

Supplementary Materials

The following Supplementary Materials are available via the PsychArchives repository (for access see Index of [Supplementary Materials](#) below):

1. Pilot Study Dataset

2. Main Study Dataset

Index of Supplementary Materials

Szastok, M., Kossowska, M., & Pyrkosz-Pacyna, J. (2019). *Supplementary materials to "Women can't have it all: Benevolent sexism predicts attitudes toward working (vs. stay-at-home) mothers"*. PsychOpen. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.2431>

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<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021342912248>



Social Psychological Bulletin is an official journal of the Polish Social Psychological Society (PSPS).



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